New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1957

Volume XVIII, Number 19 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of October 28, 1957

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, Inc., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"Compulsion"

The New York Times

October 25, 1957

Theatre: 'Compulsion'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

SINCE the Leopold-Loeb murder of the Nineteen Twenties was the most odious of the century, a dramatic version of its chief events cannot be wholly different.

The dramatic version is "Compulsion," which opened last evening at the Ambassador. Although the original script was dramatized by Meyer Levin from his novel of the same title, the program describes the current drama as the "producer's version."

Whoever wrote it, it begins with a glimpse of the middle-aged convict who is still in jail (Judd Steiner is the name in the play) and then flashes back to a malodorous scene in which two youths—Judd Steiner and Artie Straus—discuss the murder of a neighbor's boy which they have just successfully accomplished in a swamp in Chicago.

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"Compulsion" is an episodic drama of twenty scenes and fifty-one characters. It covers the essential parts of the horrifying story—the elation of the two boys who think they have achieved a perfect crime that becomes two supermen; the cheap revelry in a speakeasy; the arrest; the psychiatric investigations; the counsel of Jonathan Wilk (Clarence Darrow); the trial; the sensational sentence to life imprisonment. Including the one intermission "Compulsion" is three and one-third hours long.

Be prepared, also, for an ample report on the homosexual relations between the boys, an explicit scene between Judd and a girl he is making desperate love to on a lakeside beach and also a lot of foul conversation. Whoever the author may be and whatever the motive may be, "Compulsion" retains the filthiness of the subject it is portraying.

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As a drama it has a pedestrian literary quality and a lumbering, diffuse theatre form. But, thanks in part to some superb acting, it includes several touching scenes — the scene on the beach with an innocent girl who understands Judd's desperation; a poignant jail scene between Artie and his broken-hearted mother; a scene in which the great humanistic lawyer pleads Artie's right to mercy to Artie's father, who is desolate; a stirring trial scene at the end, when at last "Compulsion" gets to the point.

Under Alex Segal's direction, Peter Larkin has provided a stunning unit set in which a monstrous bridge presses down on the drama with a weight that is remorseless and sinister. Roddy McDowall and Dean Stockwell play the two boys brilliantly—Mr. McDowall gay, antic and arrogant; Mr. Stockwell crushed, weak, gloomy.

Playing the part that Frank Conroy, now in a hospital, had to relinquish at the last moment, Michael Constintine is excellent as the merciful attorney for the defense. Slow in movement and speech, unkempt, homely, but solid, he gives "Compulsion" its moments of dignity. Howard Da Silva is likewise excellent as the prosecution attorney—bold, loud, intelligent, realistic, vulgar in his pious tone. As the girl whose pity for Judd amounts to love, Ina Balin gives a simple performance that seems to be true and certainly is moving.

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In the preliminary scene, a newspaper reporter tells the middle-aged Judd in jail that the murder of more than thirty years ago had a meaning that the world very much needs to understand. That is the reporter's motive for visiting Judd in jail, and presumably it is the motive for this long, loosely-woven drama.

Especially in the last scenes, the dialogue includes a lot of psychiatric exposition that bears on the subject. But to this theatregoer "Compulsion" leaves the Leopold-Loeb murder about where it was before—morbid, horrible, degenerate, odious. It is easy to have a feeling of empathy for the great humanitarian who represented the defense at the trial. But it is difficult not to have a feeling of revulsion for the two youths on trial. God has the capacity to forgive them. The author of "Compulsion" is not that nobly endowed.

"COMPULSION"

Drama in two acts and twenty-seven scenes by Meyer Levin (producer's version); staged by Alex Segal; assistant to the producers, Robert Thom; settings by Peter Larkin; costumes by John Boxer; lighting by Charles Elson; co-producer, Len S. Gruenberg; presented by Michael Myerberg at the Ambassador Theatre, October 24, 1957. The cast:

Judd Steiner (1924)..... Dean Stockwell
Artie Straus.... Roddy McDowall
Charles Kessler..... Ben Astar
Horn..... Howard Da Silva
Mike Prager..... John Marley
Myra Seligman.... Barbra Loden
Ruth Goldenberg..... Ina Balin
Oliver Steger..... Ben Yaffee
McNamara..... Elliott Sullivan
Padua..... Paul Stevens
Mrs. Straus..... Joan Croydon
Jonathan Wilk..... Michael Constantine
Judah Steiner, Sr..... Bernard Lenrow
Ferdinand Feidscher..... Roger de Koven
Dr. Stauffer..... Reynolds Evans

DAILY NEWS

October 25, 1957

'Compulsion' a Powerful Drama

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"Compulsion," which opened last evening at the Ambassador Theatre, is a powerful dramatization of the murder of Bobby Franks by Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb in Chicago in 1924. Thanks to almost incredibly tense performances by Dean Stockwell and Roddy McDowall as the killers, the play is indeed overpowering for a good stretch of the way—a story of crime to make the blood run cold. Toward the end, in a courtroom scene in which alienists are called upon to testify, the drama slows down and makes one realize that it is running longer than three hours. Much of this scene repeats what the audience has already been told or has observed.

Because of a squabble over changes between author and producer, the program bills "Compulsion" as the producer's version — Michael Myerberg being the producer—of a dramatization by Meyer Levin. Levin has taken the record of the Bobby Franks murder and changed the names of all the principals, but he has not changed the events. He has arranged these events in a swift procession of scenes, using the dramatist's right to a bit of fiction here and there for the sake of theatricality, and brought a national sensation back to vivid life.

Supermen?

The perverted relation between Leopold, 19, and Loeb, 18, is skillfully minimized, for it was not this deviation which caused the youths to commit the monstrous murder of a young victim who was chosen at random. One of them fancied himself as a super-criminal and the other regarded himself as a superman right out of Nietzsche, and this was the genesis of the crime.

The facts of the Leopold-Loeb case are again fresh in the public mind, having been rehashed in the press because of pressure to get Nathan Leopold paroled from his sentence, which was life on one count and 99 years on another. It would seem that Levin is on the side of parole, for "Compulsion" ends with the judge pointing out, after passing sentence, that possible parole is in the hands of a state authority other than his. This was not quite all the real judge said. He added that he hoped parole would never come.

The cast of "Compulsion" is enormous, and under Alex Segal's direction it gives a crackling performance. The pace of the first two-thirds of the drama is made possible by an admirably flexible setting designed by Peter Larkin.

Played to the Hilt

Given roles of enormous emotion and great length, McDowall and Stockwell play the killers to the hilt. Notwithstanding their crime, they are likable and intelligent—which makes their deed all the less understandable. Seldom have young actors played such trying roles so gallantly.

Stepping in at the last moment for the ailing Frank Conroy, Michael Constantine gives a splendid impersonation of the boys' great lawyer, Clarence Darrow. It was Darrow's tricky job to get the youths their life sentences, saving them from the hanging an aroused public—and a sharp, tough prosecutor, Judge Crowe—demanded. Another acting highlight is Howard Da Silva's prosecutor.

There remains only time to mention, but not fit into the story, the good work of Ben Astar, Ina Balin, Barbara Loden, Elliott Sullivan, Joan Croydon, Roger De Koven and Edward Cullen.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
October 25, 1957

FIRST NIGHT REPORT
WALTER KERR'S REVIEW
'Compulsion'

"COMPULSION," which may be the work of Meyer Levin or Robert Thom or both, is a staged documentary based on a child-killing by homosexuals in Chicago during the 'twenties. It runs for better than three and one-half hours. Its principal flaw, I think, is that there is no clear reason why it shouldn't have run two and one-half, or seven and one-half, or ten and one-half hours.

That is to say, it is without a single, driving, organizing principle that will say what is to be left in and what left out, that will act as a suspenseful thread to carry us through any amount of courtroom bickering, that will make the evening as a whole stand up straight on the stage and keep it from keeling over backward in a titanic sprawl.

"Compulsion" lacks the dramatic shape to sustain, and pull together, its many virtues. Some of the virtues are extraordinary ones. There is, for instance, a restless, volatile, sometimes dizzying performance by Roddy McDowall as a teen - age killer who can Charleston, quote Nietzsche, talk to his teddy-bear, and pinch sob-sisters in a jail cell with the same arrogant, jovial, and terrifying intensity.

There are scenes that catch hold in their first few moments and seem to explore every nuance of disturbed, and disturbing, minds. Dean Stockwell, for instance, draws his mouth taut, freezes his shoulders, and—in gasp after effortful gasp—wrings from himself the truth of his relationship to a "master" he has chosen to serve. The grinding arrival at self-knowledge is chillingly drawn.

Ina Balin, put on the witness stand to declare her love for a pervert who has slaughtered a child, brings the twenty-scene recital of horror its only truly moving fragment; Miss Balin's simplicity and honesty are stunning. Lloyd Gough's level-eyed, quiet-spoken alienist, Howard da Silva's impatiently waspish prosecutor, Michael Constantine's dogged and generous counsel for the defense—all are fine. And this is almost to forget what is surely one of the evening's finest, if swiftest, portraits: young Luchino Solito de Solis' wary-eyed, prodding, unsuspecting brother to a criminal.

Working inside, beneath, and sometimes on top of a sweeping architectural design by Peter Larkin, director Alex Segal hurls a staggering variety of lively and atmospheric pictures at us: a jazz frenzy, sudden fear on a railway trestle, police interrupting an engagement party, panic in a cheap washroom, in a comfortable home, during a tryst along the lakeshore Dunes.

If Mr. Segal can only pile these effective episodes on top of one another, higher and higher until they become top-heavy, instead of relating them to a single, tension-filled theme, it is because of the prodigality of his authors. "Compulsion" suffers from total research. We are promised early that what these boys did "has a meaning," that the exploration is going to "help us understand what is sick in our lives." The promise is finally pretentious; it is waylaid again and again by excursions into detective-story maneuvers, into boy-girl stuff (one of the killers is arrested just as he is accepting his first genuine embrace from a girl), into jail-house ethics, into inflammatory politics, into anything and everything that actually touched a famous case. At the last not even three narrators—one of whom is lost for more than an hour—can tie it together.

The materials are interesting, if coldly clinical; the incidental excitements are often real; the end result is a mammoth labyrinth from which no indentifiable play emerges.

Journal American
October 25, 1957

Impressive Cast In Giant Project

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE WERE grave mutterings in the neighborhood of Shubert Alley when Michael Myerberg announced that he intended to produce an adaption of Meyer Levin's "Compulsion," the comprehensive novel based on the Loeb-Leopold murder of 1924. The major misgivings concerned the matter of mounting such a multi-scene documentary, also of bringing any emotional charge to a degrading episode involving the scions of two wealthy Chicago families. It seemed an impossibly complex and expensive project.

Last night, after litigation and delays, it opened at the Ambassador Theatre, and in my opinion Mr. Myerberg has conquered and confounded his critics. It is certainly the most ambitious production of the new season, and is generally a bounteous and brilliant exploration of the facts in the case, legal and psychological. I think it is too long, but I wouldn't know just where to apply the scalpel.

The real star of the evening is Peter Larkin, the set designer, who managed to combine on a single stage a sort of Rube Goldberg device which serves 19 scenes.

It is beyond either my technical knowledge or vocabulary to describe it, but it permits the players to move freely through homes, meadows, jails, speakeasies, phone booths and dunes without ever interrupting the action or offending the credulity of the audience.

There is a solid ramp in the background, and a series of drops and insets. I can only tell you—it works.

Then there has been an exceptional job of casting. As the two boys, the murderers, Roddy McDowall and Dean Stockwell are equally magnificent.

It was a difficult task, both in adaptation and interpretation, to bring some understanding to the perverted relationship between them which led to the crime. The performances of the two young actors are such that we are held and even brought to the fringes of sympathy.

Rewarding Time

In the role of the defense attorney Michael Constantine, standing in for Frank Conroy, who is ill, had a rewarding evening in the sun.

Impersonating the great Clarence Darrow, who achieved a verdict of life imprisonment rather than death for his clients, he has long and impassioned speeches while he argues that there is a compulsion, or a derangement—not technically insanity—which could impel humans to commit such a crime.

Paul Muni, Melvyn Douglas and others have been mimicking Mr. Darrow lately in "Inherit the Wind," but they will be obliged to welcome Mr. Constantine as a worthy member of the clan.

The cast is enormous, but there are effective roles for Howard da Silva, as the prosecutor; and for Ben Astar, Roger de Koven, Joan Croydon, Lloyd Gough, Ina Balin, Barbara Loden, Elliott Sullivan and Gerald Gordon.

The performance lasts well over three hours, with only one intermission. It is a perfectly astounding job of logistics from a production point of view, and Alex Segal has directed with energy and good taste.

I had a fine time.

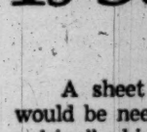
New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 25, 1957

Murder Trial Is Strong Tonic

By FRANK ASTON.

A sheet about the size of this newspaper page would be needed for striking a trial balance of "Compulsion" which opened at the Ambassador last evening.



The affair ran from shortly after 7 to 10:30, with one intermission. The first section had 16 scenes, the second four, and the speaking parts were said to number 60.

It's strong medicine. What little laughter is admitted comes from inverted humor. Speech piles on speech, climax on climax, scene on scene in a relentless examination of criminal insanity. To sit in on this show is to take something of a laboratory course in psychiatry, with prize specimens at hand for minute examination and with eloquent expositors to explain the pros and cons of capital punishment, forgiveness, mass hysteria, filial love, hatred between brothers, lust, drunkenness, sexual deviation, scarred personality, timidity, bravado, genius, stupidity. (And then some.)

Loeb-Leopold Murder.

"Compulsion" is based on the Loeb-Leopold murder case in the Chicago of 1924 when Clarence Darrow in one of his fieriest grandstand plays won life imprisonment for two wretches who, in the opinion of many newspaper readers, should have been hanged.

We meet the pair just after they have slain the boy and we stay close to them in one hideous moment after another as they brag, tremble, snarl, sob, strut and lie. We see in detail how the law traps them and how they are tried. And here's one spectator to report that at the finish he felt tired.

The truly exhausted ones, however, must have been Roddy McDowall and Dean Stockwell who played the killers. What a beating they took. Their every moment went full tilt. They did so well so often that it was difficult to choose high spots. Mr. Stockwell probably reached his peak of agony in confessing his unnatural passion and Mr. McDowall reached his in a heart-tearing jail scene with his mother when he sobbed, "I want my teddy bear." They're magnificent, these lads.

Substitute Scores.

Subbing for the ill Frank Conroy, Michael Constantine was all that could be asked in the fatherly, combative, understanding role of the defense attorney. As his courtroom opponent, Howard Da Silva, an old hand at being unpopular, was properly insistent on death by the noose.

All those scenes go by at an easy gait by virtue of spots playing on a set to suggest prison, homes, speakeasy, seashore, courtroom and whatever else is needed. If you're mechanically inclined, you'll say this part is worth the trip.

"Compulsion" is not so much a play as a parade of clinical shocks and harrowing blasts at the emotions. It has its degree of theatrical grandeur. It may not please you, but it will bruise you. Among its shortcomings are its great length and lack of suspense.

You can't sit on the edge of your seat wondering how it will come out when everyone has known the answer these last 33 years—not for three hours you can't.

Daily Mirror

October 25, 1957

ROBERT COLEMAN'S THEATRE

'Compulsion' Gripping Show

Back in 1924 the nation was shocked by what was known as the Loeb-Leopold case. Two sons of millionaires, bright in some ways beyond their years, killed a neighbor's small boy. They were out for kicks, for thrills. They thought, in their arrogance, that they had committed the perfect crime.

However, murder will out. It was discovered then that this brutal slaying was but the culmination of a series of crimes like arson and robbery by the pair. Indicted, they were defended by Clarence Darrow. Choosing trial by judge rather than jury, he succeeded in getting them off with life sentences.

DARROW WAS a controversial figure. There were those who considered him a humanitarian and genius, while others thought him a brilliant opportunist. In the case of Loeb and Leopold, he contended that murderers are but children, victims of circumstances, or glandular disturbances.

Meyer Levin recently wrote a best seller about the famous case, called "Compulsion." He dramatized it for Michael Myerberg. There have been arguments between author and producer over the script. Anyway, a rough, raw and gripping version was mounted last evening at the Ambassador Theatre.

The result is lengthy and sprawling. It calls a spade a shovel. It is melodramatic meat for those with strong stomachs. As for the squeamish, they'd better prepare for a dip into its seamy revelations of depravity and degeneracy with a shot of bicarb or spirits of ammonia. This is tough fare, even for the hardy.

Peter Larkin has designed another striking set for the new arrival, and Alex Segal has handled a cast running into the dozens ably. When Frank Conroy was taken ill earlier in the week, Michael Constantine assumed the role of Jonathon Wilk (Darrow) on short notice. Now, Conroy is a fine actor, but so is Constantine. This performance should make him a star.

RODDY McDOWALL, as the cynical, domineering Artie Straus (Leopold), and Dean Stockwell, as the more intelligent, sensitive and effeminate Judd Steiner (Loeb), bring off their demanding roles triumphantly. Howard Da Silva, Ben Astar, Ina Balin, Bernard Lenrow, Ben Yaffee, Roger DeKoven, Barbra Loden, Lloyd Gough and Reynolds Evans stand out in other assignments.

No matter who is responsible for this dramatization of "Compulsion," it lives up to its name. It is as fascinating to watch as a cobra, head puffed up with venom, ready to strike. It is like sinking into a jazzed-up replica of Dante's Inferno. It is sordid, ugly and powerful. It held the first-nighters on the edges of their seats.

Now, don't get the idea that we go along with Levin and Myerberg as to some of its conclusions. We still cannot understand why teenagers with the ultimate in IQ's, of wealthy and affectionate parents, given every opportunity, could have been so viciously destructive and anti-social.

Their saga seems to knock the theory that criminals are bred in poor environments into left field. For they were of the privileged, and heedlessly (or compulsively) sold their heritage right down the river. Diseased, as the author says, yes. Insane, we don't know. Perhaps you'd better pay a visit to the Ambassador and figure it out for yourself.

New York Post

October 25, 1957

TWO on the AISLE

By RICHARD WATTS Jr.

The Drama of Leopold and Loeb

There has been quite a lot of battling going on between author Meyer Levin and producer Michael Myerberg over the dramatization of Mr. Levin's successful novel about the famous Leopold and Loeb case. Out of the smoke and flame of warfare and the vigorous bulletins issued by the combatants, there emerged the information that two scripts existed, and that the novelist had suggested presenting them on successive evenings. My dark suspicion is that Mr. Myerberg gave in and offered both versions laid end on end at the Ambassador Theater last night.

At least, the dramatization of Mr. Levin's "Compulsion" gave me the disturbing impression that it was a couple of plays on the same theme. I suppose there are two ways of presenting theatrically the story of the two Chicago boys who upset the nation back in 1924 by their so-called "thrill" killing of another youth. One would be to depict the harrowing affair graphically enough to permit the lessons to be drawn from it to speak for themselves. The other would be to make the case frankly a debate on its issues of social and moral responsibility.

Two Approaches

Faced by these two possible methods of approach, the play seems to have chosen both of them: With much detail, it tells of the two young men, here known as Judd Steiner and Artie Straus, from the time of the killing through their apprehension by the law, the summoning of Clarence Darrow (called Jonathan Wilk) to their defense and his plea for his clients after he had persuaded them to plead guilty. And then, once the hearing before a judge has begun, the whole matter is set down again in vast detail during a lengthy trial scene.

It is here where it seems to me that the law of diminishing dramatic returns begins to operate. There are some vivid and powerful scenes in the course of the narrative, but when witness after witness and psychiatrist after psychiatrist takes the stand, and the attorneys for the defense and the prosecution make seemingly interminable speeches, the whole ground is gone over and over again, and the repetition strikes me as fatal. What had been dramatically impressive becomes increasingly tedious and unnecessary.

Taking Sides

Another weakness emerges at this point. The story of the two boys is presented with a kind of objectivity that is emotionally and intellectually effective, but, once the trial has started, the objectivity disappears. It isn't that the viewpoint is clearly that of Clarence Darrow. It is that the prosecutor and the psychiatrist on his side are not even permitted to offer a case that is effective from their own viewpoint. It would have been well to remember how Shaw allowed his Inquisitor to make an eloquent appeal for injustice in "Saint Joan."

In the roles representing, respectively, Leopold and Loeb, Dean Stockwell and Roddy McDowall offer striking and impressive performances, and the matter of homosexual relationship is managed without excess. Stepping into the long and difficult role standing for Darrow, Michael Constantine, substituting at a late moment for the ailing Frank Conroy, is excellent. Howard Da Silva, as the district attorney and Lloyd Gough, as a sympathetic psychiatrist, are of great help, and so are Ina Balin and Barbra Loden in small parts. But "Compulsion" talks itself into ineffectuality.

"Monique"

DAILY NEWS

October 23, 1957

'Monique' Not Diabolique Enough To Make Good Murder Thriller

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In the last of the six scenes of "Monique," which producer-director Shepard Traube presented with admirable care at the Golden Theatre last evening, the plot is given a good twist. But the twist comes too late. Here is a play about murder which dies before the victim does.

Although I never was a Boy Scout, I took an oath in my youth never to divulge the secret of who killed Cock Robin. All I can hint about "Monique" is that the corpse you think is a corpse isn't a corpse and the really-to-goodness corpse isn't really a murder victim. This sort of twist would be relished by J. B. Priestley, and I wish he had.

New Adaptation

"Monique" has been based by Dorothy and Michael Blankfort on a novel by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac, of France. In 1955 this novel served as the basis for a taut French movie thriller, "Diabolique," which came to a shuddery climax when a corpse bubbled up from its watery bed.

The Blankforts' adaptation has shifted the locale from a boys' school to the home of a traveling salesman. The three principal characters are the salesman, his wife and his mistress. Salesman and mistress think the wife should be put away. But do they put her away? On account of my oath I can't tell you.

A Tricky Actress

But I can tell you that Patricia Jessel, the tricky actress of Agatha Christie's "Witness for the Prosecution," is again a tricky actress, in "Monique," impersonating a lady doctor. Maureen Hurley enacts a wife who is so mean that even a stranger would be justified in killing her. Denholm Elliott plays an anguished husband with anguish, and Percy Waram wanders through the plot as a retired police inspector who doesn't manage to solve anything.

It has taken the authors and director Traube too long to get going. "Monique," handsomely done though it is, is a five-scene buildup for a one-scene play. It isn't a whodunit but a whydoit.

"MONIQUE"

Drama in two acts and six scenes by Dorothy and Michael Blankfort; based on a novel by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac; staged by Shepard Traube; settings by John Robert Lloyd; lighting by Tharon Musser; costumes by Helene Pons; presented by Mr. Traube in association with Stephen W. Sharmat at the John Golden Theatre, October 22, 1957. The cast:

Fernand Ravinel . . Denholm Elliott
Lisette . . . . . Deidre Owen
Lucienne Ravinel . . Maureen Hurley
Henriette . . . . . Julie Bovasso
Dr. Monique Rigaud . . . . . Patricia Jessel
Desire Merlin . . . . . Percy Waram
Goutez . . . . . Neil Fitzgerald
Andre . . . . . Guy Sorel
Messenger . . . . . William Myers

New York Post

October 23, 1957

TWO on the AISLE

By RICHARD WATTS Jr.

Would You Trust a Woman Doctor?

Although "Monique" stems from the French novel upon which the successful murder film called "Diabolique" was based, it is said to have a different solution to the enigma that it poses. Never having seen the movie, I am unable to tell you this on my own authority. But, as one who is firmly convinced that even a fairly good mystery melodrama is better than no mystery melodrama at all, it seemed to me that the new crime play by Dorothy and Michael Blankfort, which opened last night at the John Golden, was at least a pretty good thriller.

Nor is this as chilly a commendation as it might first appear. "Monique" is certainly not, to my mind, in the very top rank of its school, which would have been high praise, indeed. But it has an arresting murder situation to consider, its passions are dark and sinister, its characters are enigmatic and deceptive, its atmosphere is menacing, its detective is intelligent if not infallible, and its motives are devious. Finally, it has a solution that is steeped in treachery and evil and is quite likely to surprise you.

Naturally, I won't tell you what it is. I hope you don't think I am a spoilsport capable of anything so monstrous. Yet it should be safe enough for me to raise one point about it. Surprise solutions to mystery melodramas should, I believe, either be tremendously ironic or appeal to your sense of justice, and I'm not sure that the ending of "Monique" fits satisfactorily into one of these categories. It surely doesn't fit into both. But, if it didn't altogether please me, it did result in a climax of considerable theatrical effectiveness.

It all takes place in a French town not far from Paris. A pleasant young man and his nagging but beautiful wife are not getting along well, but she refuses to divorce him. He is in love with a woman doctor named Monique, who is a veritable Lady Macbeth of homicidal determination, and she suggests to him a plan by which they will do away with the apparently unwanted wife. It is Dr. Monique's strong will that steels the weakling to the crime. Up to that point, the crime seems simple enough, but that is when things grow enigmatic.

On the whole, "Monique" has the virtue of sticking to its business. If there are moments when it appears on the verge of going in for philosophical speculations, such as the lady doctor's comparison of a crime with a necessary bit of surgery, you may be sure they will eventually be tied in with the plot. This is something you may have confidence in. Otherwise, I advise you to trust nobody or nothing. The authors have a lot of skulduggery in mind. And it must be said on their behalf that very little of their play is lacking in tension.

The title role is played by Patricia Jessel, a wonderfully sinister lady, who fooled all of us in "Witness for the Prosecution," and is apt to fool you again. In fact, if she ever did portray Lady Macbeth, I wouldn't advise even Macbeth to trust her. She's fine. So, too, are Denholm Elliott as the weakling husband, Maureen Hurley as the unpleasant wife, and Percy Waram as the somewhat baffled detective. In smaller roles, Deirdre Owen, Neil Fitzgerald, Guy Sorel and Julie Bovasso are helpful. "Monique" assuredly has its virtues.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 23, 1957

Lady Doctor Is a Bad Girl

By FRANK ASTON.

They're a couple of no-goods, this pair in "Monique" at the Golden. There's this iron-faced woman doctor named Monique and she's crazy about this weakling of a married man whose wife is as mean to him as can be and really should be done in. So Ironface shows the spineless fellow how easy it is to murder when you have a degree in medicine. And he is so eager to have this medical dame all to himself that he goes along in the plans for elimination of his spouse, letting you see how it's done.

It's interesting to note a blonde wife can look very pretty after she has undergone lethal attention and is being carried across a shadowy room for extermination.

A great deal of cognac is consumed during these rites, firearms are exhibited significantly, a wise, retired detective comes and goes without solving anything, a slatternly maid supplies a few laughs, as does a hypochondriacal brother, and the little girl next door keeps letting everyone know she's in love with the flabby husband. The characters have French names and seem to be living in France, but some of the accents are English.

In these who-dunnit-and-how shows you're supposed to see it yourself to learn how it comes out. (It's slightly different from the movie, by the way.) So your correspondent will now dry up, aside from remarking that things start slowly in masses of talk and apply the shock treatment to ticket holders only in the last two of the six scenes. When it does materialize, the shock is pretty fair.

Denholm Elliott and Patricia Jessell carry the main load. He's a fine craftsman, the way he turns himself into a jelly fish, and she's an elegant iceberg as a sort of Lady Macbeth with an M.D. Percy Waram makes a great deal out of a rather vague part as an old sleuth.

Shepard Traube steers these and the other players neatly and professionally through their somewhat thankless chores in a living-room set designed for homicide by John Robert Lloyd.

Daily Mirror

October 23, 1957

ROBERT COLEMAN'S THEATRE

'Monique' Fails to Score

Over the years, New Yorkers have come to demand something more than tricks in their melodramas. Merely pitting their wits against mental mystery gymnastics isn't enough for them. They prefer the psychological approach, with a goodly amount of emotional appeal added.

The trouble with "Monique," which Shepard Traube installed in the John Golden Theatre Tuesday evening, is that you follow it with all the feeling that you'd bring to the solution of a crossword puzzle. You seek to unwind the strands along with authors Dorothy and Michael Blankfort without caring about the people caught in them.

A gun salesman is living with a petty and passionless spouse in a small town about an hour's drive from Paris. Her coldness drives him into the arms of a woman doctor. They plot and carry out the wife's murder. Then the spineless husband, thinking their plan has backfired, kills himself.

WHAT COMES AFTER—and plenty does—is a matter of contrivance, schemed as though done with an engineer's slide rule. It's all pat and precise, too much so for our taste. Being a mystery play reviewer from way back, we know enough about the rules of the trade to refuse to reveal any more.

Anyway, we can tell you that the first act is about as stiff as insulation wallboard. The characters' speech is stuffy and sketchy. It is as though the Blankforts were not of a mind to let you see their hearts tick. The result is a parade of zombies, figures of flesh without pulsing blood.

Only in the second half does the piece begin to pick up some pace and acquire a measure of suspense. And by then, we're afraid it's too late. There is enough material to fill two stanzas, and make for a completely satisfying evening of chills, but the scripters haven't used it with sufficient resource.

Producer Shepard Traube has signed some outstanding actors to wander through this macabre charade, based on a novel by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac. There are Patricia Jessel and Denholm Elliott, for instance, cast as the callous medico and the neurotic husband.

THESE DISTINGUISHED English players have shone here in modern works, and achieved stature in the classics in their native land. Currently, they seem a bit abashed by their roles, unable to do better than go through the motions methodically. It was as if Miss Jessel were wistfully recalling her triumphant Lady Macbeth at Stratford, steeling a consort (Elliott), to whom she's not wed, to horrendous deeds.

Percy Waram is quite at ease as a retired detective who suspects foul play, and is unable to prove it. Neil Fitzgerald has a few effective moments as a garrulous carpenter. **Guy Sorel stands out in a bit as a hypochondriacal brother-in-law.** Maureen Hurley and Deirdre Owen are baffled by their assignments.

"Monique," in sum, has hypnotic high spots, clever twists and baffling sequences—but not enough of them to make it the thriller we've been waiting for.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 23, 1957

FIRST NIGHT REPORT

WALTER KERR'S REVIEW

'Monique'

ONE of the problems that besets actor Denholm Elliott in "Monique" is that no one can find his wife. For awhile, I thought he'd eaten her. I figured he'd chewed up all the scenery and was still hungry.

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The new melodrama at the Golden finds Mr. Elliott as restless as a willow in a windstorm, as jumpy as a puppet on a string. There are, it is true, a few moments right at the beginning of the evening when it looks as though the performer, who has given good performances before, was going to give another one.

Then the ague sets in. As his ash-blonde wife stands with one foot right-angled and her hand planted firmly on her hip to tell him—for the seventy-sixth time—that he will never get a divorce from her so long as she is alive, Mr. Elliott's chin begins to quiver. As his mistress blinks her big black eyes at him and suggests that the obvious solution to the problem is to murder his wife, his knees go. By the time the deed is done and the neighbors have begun to bring in the several thousand clews that have been left willy-nilly around the garden pool, this poor man is in a terrible state. The simple matter of holding a telephone causes him to sink to the floor; the presence of a gentle and retired detective causes him to behave the way Dr. Jekyll must have behaved just after taking a particularly bad batch of that potion. Not to mince words, Mr. Elliott is a wreck.

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It falls upon the urbane Percy Waram to enter the living room during one of these more violent seizures, stare long and intently at his man, and then, with the air of a very shrewd fellow discovering something elusive, say "I could tell the minute I came in here that you were disturbed." That Mr. Waram is able to speak the line without convulsing everybody within six blocks of the playhouse is an enormous tribute to his skill, resourcefulness, dignity and past record.

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And since Mr. Waram is the only player in a company of normally intelligent, attractive, and competent players to escape the exercises in heavy-breathing and nostril-distending that so distinguish the evening, I'm afraid we must turn—in our pursuit of the real culprit—to director Shepard Traube. Attention must be paid.

Mr. Traube has caused Patricia Jessel, who fooled us all and fooled us honestly in "Witness for the Prosecution" several years back, to glower and glare, to whip window-drapes shut, and to roll up her sleeves for mayhem with such transparent dispatch that you wouldn't trust her with the silverware beyond the first five minutes. Maureen Hurley, Guy Sorel, Deirdre Owen and Neil Fitzgerald are just as badly off. The stuffed birds that adorn the walls are no more stuffed than they.

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Not that Mr. Traube and victims have anything subtle in the way of a text to work with. Dramatists Dorothy and Michael Blankfort have gone back to the original novel upon which, I believe, that excellent film "Diabolique" was based, and wiped it clean of real tension. This is partly achieved by letting the dialogue stammer. (When someone says something like "I came by yesterday through the garden" someone else replies "Yesterday? Through the garden?", and why they want to neglect the equally felicitous "Came by?" I'll never know). And it is partly the result of a rather fancy diction that may have been translated from the French, but not thoroughly enough ("So this is goodbye, my friend, my beloved," "Monique, don't go!").

Anyway, the mechanics of an interesting triangle involving deaths that aren't deaths and love that isn't love are laid distressingly, unchillingly bare. "This fog unnerves me," murmurs Denholm Elliott, placing the blame squarely in the wrong place. The fog isn't in it with the plotting and staging.

The New York Times

October 23, 1957

Theatre: Trick Ending

Monique,' Murder Play, Opens at the Golden

By BROOKS ATKINSON

"MONIQUE," which opened at the John Golden last evening, is the story of a man who tries to murder his wife.

This is more serious than a nontheatregoer might suspect. For it compels the authors, Dorothy and Michael Blankfort, to invent one of the most intricate plots of the decade, and the chief actors, Patricia Jessel and Denholm Elliott, to imagine themselves doing things they really ought not to do.

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"Monique" is based on a novel by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac, who are French and interpret life according to their own family customs. One might fairly object that the plot is too intricate for its own good and the conclusion too cozy for the safety of mankind in general. According to the code of ethics that all drama critics are compelled to sign before they can have a city license, it would be a violation of the law to divulge the conclusion here. Just say that it is not at all what you might expect. Pretty upsetting from a moral point of view, too.

But this report comes from one theatregoer who was pleasantly horrified by nearly everything that Mr. and Mrs. Blankfort set down for the actors to do. Fernand Ravinel is perfectly justified in wanting to remove his wife from active society. She has a foul temper. Since Dr. Monique Rigaud (a comely dame) professes to be passionately in love with him, she in turn is justified in putting her immense fund of medical knowledge at his disposal. They arrange a foolproof murder that is very much to their credit, and keeps the first half of the evening invitingly gruesome and apparently definitive.

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In compliance with the critic's code, this column cannot divulge the astonishing turn the plot takes in the second act. As writing, the second act is not so terse and constructive as the first, although the implications of the conclusion are likely to unhinge you if you take drama personally.

But there is no doubt about the keenness of the acting in the principal parts. Shepard Traube, the director, has cast the chief roles as if he were staging "Oedipus Rex," "Macbeth" or "The White Devil." Percy Waram, in crisp chin whiskers, plays a retired French detective with the outward grace of an impeccable gentleman and the inner skepticism of a student of human nature.

As the homicidal husband, Mr. Elliott plays with all the boyish charm and upper-class fastidiousness that he brought to Anouilh's "Ring Round the Moon" in 1950. For it is part of the convention of the shudder-show to cast it well above its literary station with actors who are genuine artists. Mr. Elliott's portrait of the husband's progress from resolution to hysteria is vivid and versatile.

Looking very sharp in Helene Pons costumes, Miss Jessel plays Monique, the medical lady who has an unusual facility in crime. Miss Jessel is the slender though wiry lady who confounded audiences in "Witness for the Prosecution" for 646 certified performances beginning in 1954. Now she is running through the maze of "Monique" with equal brilliance —cool or burning, according to what the authors have in mind at the moment, swift or deliberate, contemptuous or ravishing and frighteningly sinister at the end.

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Probably it is fun to play a part with so many conflicting emotions. It is certainly fun to watch Miss Jessel glide through crime so triumphantly. Although "Monique" is not the best thriller ever written, it will do until a neater one comes along. Any man contemplating the murder of his wife would do well to see it before he makes his final preparations.

Journal American

October 23, 1957

A 'Thriller' That Isn't

The Trick Ending Fails After a Rambling Buildup

By JOHN McCLAIN

AS A DEVOTED thriller-chiller fan it pains me to report that "Monique," the specimen offered at the John Golden Theatre last night, does not succeed in its eerie mission. There is a surprise ending, to be sure, but the play follows a tedious and rambling path to the conclusion and, once there, trails off in several unresolved directions.

This new mystery by Dorothy and Michael Blankfort is based on a French novel and subsequent film which, I am told, employed a quite different pattern. Without more than hearsay knowledge of either I would say the original idea was the more plausible. This one is silly, and slightly soiled.

That wouldn't necessarily demolish the evening if the first act, the events leading up to the switcheroo, the introduction of characters and their polite meanderings, held more interest. There is an insufferable amount of philosophizing —not exactly notable—and too little on-stage action.

The figurative bomb which is set to explode in the last act goes off with a respectable detonation, but the events following the denouement are fuzzy. A character has been suitably disposed of, but at curtain time there seems to be little sense to the entire caper.

It is unfortunate that the proceedings are not more rewarding, for Patricia Jessel, that expert operative from "Witness for the Prosecution," is again on hand in brilliant form. She is sinister and commanding in the role of a French lady doctor who conspires to remove the hurdle from her romance in a friend's home.

Denholm Elliott, another trusted import, is required to tremble and tear his hair as the fellow conspirator in the dastardly plot. Percy Waram has an even less salutory assignment as a retired detective who makes a feeble pitch at solving the crime, fails, and wanders off into the wings.

Maureen Hurley, Neil Fitzgerald, Deirdre Owen, Julie Bovasso and Guy Sorel strive nobly in lesser roles.

The sad fact seems to be that an ingenious ending is not enough fodder for a play, especially when even the ending is inconclusive.

"The Cave Dwellers"

Daily Mirror

October 20, 1957

ROBERT COLEMAN'S THEATRE

'Cave Dwellers' Are Saroyan Folks

William Saroyan loves people, and says so out loud. He is a master at getting eloquence from the inarticulate. Few dramatists of our time have his genius for characterization. He has a soaring imagination, and can put wings on words, though he sometimes uses too many of them—to the point of confusion.

In "The Cave Dwellers," Bill arrives at the notion that people are angels, and wonders why they have to dwell in caves and even human bodies. The cave, in this instance, is the stage of an abandoned East Side theatre, which shelters a once-great actress, a former top-flight clown and a broken prize fighter. They are identified as the Queen, King and Duke.

To their grubby haven come a frightened girl, an animal trainer with a pregnant wife and a huge black bear, to escape freezing on icy streets. The child is born, and the fighter becomes a thief for the first time in his life to get milk for it. The milkman's son, a mute, chases him to recover the loot, and, seeing how things are, leaves it.

EVENTUALLY, a hard-boiled wrecking-crew boss wanders into their squatters' quarters, bent on demolishing the building to make way for a slum-clearance project. Softened by their plight, he orders his men to take a couple of days' sick leave, so that the refugees might have time to find other homes.

To be honest with you, we had a lump in our throat and moisture in our eyes, as these hapless, bewildered, yet valiant, folk, one by one, vanished through the theatre's grimy and cobwebbed stagedoor. We felt as though we were parting, for the last time, from good and worthy friends. Philosophers and gallants, all.

Barry Jones is immensely touching as the clown who wagers a cast-off shoe against his ability to make strong men weep. All to gain coffee and a few coins. When he loses, the pride in his art is gone. He is almost destroyed. Yet, ironically, though he doesn't know it, he was more successful than he thought.

EUGENIE LEONTOVICH is moving, indeed, as the passe star who lives on memories. Wayne Morris is disturbingly accurate as the gentle pug, who missed a title because he was afraid of killing opponents with his punch. Susan Harrison, a young actress of quality, is warming as the girl who drifts into a seeming madhouse, only to find that it all makes sense.

Carmen Capalbo has directed Saroyan's parable with an eye for all its values.

It took courage for Capalbo and Stanley Chase to mount "The Cave Dwellers" at the Bijou. For, we suspect, that it is a motley fabric of frustration, hope and dreams, likely to have limited appeal. But, for all its faults, we found it enchanting. We're just a sucker for Saroyan. He's a man with a heart, God love him!

"THE CAVE DWELLERS"

Play in two acts and eleven scenes by William Saroyan; staged by Carmen Capalbo; designed by William Pitkin; costumes by Ruth Morley; lighting by Lee Watson; presented by Mr. Capalbo and Stanley Chase at the Bijou Theatre, October 19, 1957. The cast:

The Duke.....Wayne Morris
The Queen...Eugenie Leontovich
The Girl.....Susan Harrison
The King.....Barry Jones
The Young Opponent..Ivan Dixon
A Young Man...John Alderman
Factory Foreman..Ronald Weyand
Woman with Dog....Vergel Cook
Negrita.....Herself
A Clown.....Gerald Hiken
Young Queen.....Francine Amdur
Wrecking Crew Boss..Clifton James

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 21, 1957

Saroyan Eyes Little Lives

By FRANK ASTON.

William Saroyan in his "Cave Dwellers" arranges a dozen performers (including a tiny dog) in two acts and 11 scenes to illustrate some of his ideas on mankind. They are gentle ideas, quizzical, baffling and softened with laughter. They reach no stunning solutions, but that's because Mr. Saroyan doesn't pretend to be his brother's caretaker. He is content to look on with tolerance.

His cave is the strewn stage of an abandoned theater on New York's lower east side. It is about to be razed in a slum clearance project. Existing in the cold gloom are a discarded prize fighter, a forgotten leading woman, dubbed the queen, and the shell of a one-time clown, known as the king. All have tasted greatness, all now look less than nothing, but in each burns a wry, comical, pathetic yearning to be helpful, to be applauded.

The king and queen have crept into this cavern because their kind of royalty belongs in the theater, "last arena in which all is always possible." They have admitted the ex-pug because he in his way has entertained. He, as the show starts, welcomes a wispy girl seeking shelter from the snow and from life. And first thing you know in come a man, his wife, a trained bear (played by Ronald Weyand, let it be hastily explained) and an infant who is being born as the first-act curtain falls.

Reeks of Symbolizism.

If you suggest this sounds a little jumbled and irrational, Mr. Saroyan might ask for any spot in life that does make sense. He's not reporting logic. He's entertaining with sequences that are important to the participants but actually little more than trivia. Even his boy-gets-girl is different. The two meet, fall in love and embrace without a word. It must be that way, because he's a deaf mute.

The play reeks with symbolism. The bear represents hurt trust (once and once only his master slapped him); the infant is a force to bring out the continuing goodness in people; the boxer is humanity groping for guidance; a lost shoe is vanity. A dream passage warns us not to let ambition and disappointment pray on our minds. Or at least that's what your observer derived from the thoroughly enjoyable rigamarole.

Superb Acting.

Acting and direction are superlative. In the forefront are Wayne Morris' lovable boob of a boxer, Eugenie Leontovich's actress who can still preen, Barry Jones' sad clown, Clifton James' heart-of-gold foreman. The incidental music, written in contemporary mode, fits beautifully.

Something pretty wonderful hit Broadway when the comedy opened at the Bijou Saturday evening. She played the maiden fleeing life's storm. The name is Susan Harrison.

The New York Times
October 21, 1957

Theatre: A Sunny Tale

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ON Broadway fourteen years have passed since William Saroyan last invited us to sit down to listen to a story. "The Cave Dwellers," which opened at the Bijou on Saturday evening, is one of the most enchanting stories he has ever told. Very likely, thousands of listeners will be sitting down to it all season.

Fairy-story would probably be the exact description. For "The Cave Dwellers" records the adventures of some penniless people who are camping out on the stage of an abandoned theatre that is about to be pulled down for a housing project on the East Side. One who calls herself "the Queen" is the ruin of a former actress. "The King" used to be a celebrated clown. "The Duke" was once a prizefight champion. "The Girl" (she is too young to have been famous at anything) is a homeless, frightened wretch who comes in off the streets.

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Don't expect a plot or a conclusion from Mr. Saroyan. He is not the man to write with a slide-rule. But expect more humor, grace, innocence and improvisation than he has put in one piece since the halcyon days of "The Time of Your Life" (1939). Although food is scarce and the cold is congealing, Mr. Saroyan's characters have glowing spirits and wonderful memories of their triumphant days.

In the course of a newspaper review, it is a little difficult to explain how it happens that the cave dwellers are joined by a young man, his wife, baby and a performing bear. But it is part of the magic of the Saroyan style that a performing bear becomes a valid member of the community without straining the audience's credulity. No one is much astonished when he comes lumbering in. He turns out to be one of the finest creatures in the play.

If "The Cave Dwellers" seems to be the most winning play Mr. Saroyan has written in eighteen years, Carmen Capalbo deserves a share of the credit. As director, he has understood the play. He has cast it imaginatively. He has designed a performance that is as spontaneous as Mr. Saroyan's style of writing. The acting is a joy in every respect, and so is Bernado Segall's musicalized make-believe.

All honor to all the players —Barry Jones, whose droll comedy and perfect taste make the King a lovable figure; Eugenie Leontovich, whose guile, skill and animation make the Queen entertaining with an undertone of mockery; Wayne Morris, whose simple-hearted Duke is attractive and real; Susan Harrison, whose unaffected portrait of the Girl has strength, radiance, variety and depth.

It is the virtue of Mr. Capalbo's performance that it always has substance even when the writing seems capricious, and all the parts are acted freshly. For instance, Gerald Hiken as the trainer of the bear: his enthusiasm and confidence in the wrestling scene have tenderness and reality. Or Ronald Weyand's bear: without being cute it is full of personality. Or Clifton James and Ivan Dixon as the advance guard of the wrecking crew in the last scene: Their tone of concern and goodwill is just rugged and deliberate enough to make the sentiment of the scene palatable.

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If the taste of the performance, and of William Pitkin's cavernous scenery and Ruth Morley's rag-bag costumes were not perfect, "The Cave Dwellers" might be mawkish or might collapse in whimsey. But the theatre has taken Mr. Saroyan on his highest level as an original story-teller in a mood of good feeling. It is a pleasure to watch excellent actors make interesting characters out of his sunny improvisations. It is a pleasure to sit down to his sunny tale.

Journal American
October 21, 1957

Grace and Love In Saroyan Style

By JOHN McCLAIN

WILLIAM Saroyan's latest dramatic venture, "The Cave Dwellers", which opened at the Bijou Theatre Saturday night, is a warm and emotional exercise in symbols. As in his "The Time of Your Life", he is examining the world and its often-tragic, frequently-funny and persistently-baffled inhabitants. He comes to a sort of over-all conclusion that Life is grace and courtesy and love.

Along the way there are numberless other thoughts and fancies which the audience can interpret in its own terms. There will be those who see in it a pattern for world peace; others, perhaps lowering their sights, will read into it a simple exploration of human nobility. Whatever the conclusions, it cannot fail to challenge and stimulate the serious theatre-goer.

To tell his tale Saroyan has assembled a weird cast of indigents, living in a Manhattan theatre which is about to be torn down. There is an ex-clown, now reduced to begging, a former leading lady of the theatre, and a one-time heavyweight champion.

Hope and Despair

They are joined by a destitute young couple, complete with new-born babe; an enormous black bear and his trainer; a young lady fugitive from a toy factory, a young man who works for the milk company, and sundry others.

There is utterly no point in describing what they do, since the play follows no conventional pattern. They sleep and dream, they come and go in the slow parade of their struggles for survival. They hope and despair and love; they have small successes and failures.

But they are never dreary. The writing is almost always bright and beguiling in the Saroyan manner, and it is occasionally very funny. This is the idiom of the people, and it has a true ring. There are also three songs, composed by Bernardo Segall, wonderfully-well integrated into the mood of the proceedings, and ingratiating in themselves.

Barry Jones, that superlative performer, has a field day in the role of the broken-down clown; Eugenie Leontovich is appealing, hilarious and constantly commanding as the former star of the theatre, Wayne Morris is a surprisingly studied and relaxed one-time prize fighter. As the young girl, Susan Harrison gives a poignant and wistful performance.

There are other capable assists from: Gerald Hiken, Vergel Cook, John Alderman and Ivan Dixon. William Pitkin has supplied a setting of an empty stage converted to a dwelling which is suitably shabby, and Carmen Capalbo has ingeniously utilized his people and the novel medium to notable advantage.

"The Cave Dwellers" will have, in my opinion, a limited appeal. It demands respect and thoughtful consideration from its customers, and the public willing to make such an effort seems woefully wanting these days.

On the other hand, it is a gratifying experience—for the devout.

New York Post

October 21, 1957

TWO on the AISLE

By RICHARD WATTS Jr.

William Saroyan Returns to Us

It is good to have William Saroyan back in the theater; good for our enjoyment and also good for our souls. His new play, "The Cave Dwellers," which opened Saturday night at the Bijou, lacks some of his old-time exuberance of humor and prodigality of invention, but the basic Saroyan touch is still there, with its honest friendliness of spirit, its warm open-heartedness, and its utterly unpatronizing fondness for the misfits of the world. There is something wonderfully comforting about having it with us again in this day of our uncertainty.

Sweetness, benevolence and affection for the human race can be perilous commodities in the drama, and Mr. Saroyan doesn't make it any easier for himself by pushing them to the border of what a foe could call sentimentality. But he happily has a quality that turns his love affair with mankind into a beautiful romance instead of a vulgar liaison. It is his remarkable ability to make his fondness for battered humanity seem real and healthy and joyful; as utterly lacking in affectation or condescension. It therefore becomes completely winning.

The Outcasts

In "The Cave Dwellers," the pattern is pretty much as usual. A group of outcasts with the gift of eloquence is huddled together in defense against the outside world, with an abandoned theater taking the place of the memorable barroom of "The Time of Your Life." They include an old clown, a veteran tragic actress, a battered ex-pugilist, and a gentle girl waif, but later they are joined by other Saroyanesque figures, including a trained bear. And it is typical of the author that, when the terrifying outside world finally enters, it, too, is friendly.

But all of this, of course, is merely the framework for the true concern of the evening, which is the setting down of the dreams, the memories, the hopes and the fears of its people. And how appealing Mr. Saroyan makes this outpouring of their lonely spirits! He can even give us a speech in which the old actress insists that "the secret of the theater is love," an argument that is open to considerable debate in the case of certain other playwrights, and make it seem not only convincing but also a kind of ringing new slogan for the drama.

The New Touch

I guess it wasn't until that splendid bear, name of Gorky, made his entrance that I was completely captured by the spell of "The Cave Dwellers." For it seems to me true that a certain mellow sadness has taken the place of the wild comic exuberance of the earlier plays, and I wasn't altogether sure that I welcomed the change. But the Saroyan heart is still there, and there is much to be said for the new mellowness. He has told us the theater's secret, and I'll tell you his. He makes us believe in his beautiful people because he believes in them.

That fine actor, Barry Jones, sets the tone of the play by his moving portrayal of the sad old clown, while Eugenie Leontovich, as the tragedy queen, and Wayne Morris, as the broken-down fighter, are splendidly right in their roles. There is an honest, touching and beautiful performance of the waif by young Susan Harrison, already an actress of quality in her first Broadway appearance. The others, too, are excellent, with a particular word due Clifton James as the sympathetic man from outside. It is all very cheering. Welcome back, Bill!

DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

October 21, 1957

Saroyan's Loveliest Play, 'Cave Dwellers,' Acted Magnificently

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Bless William Saroyan for being a dauntless sentimentalist, and bless all of the actors who are speaking for him at the Bijou Theatre. His play, "The Cave Dwellers," which opened Saturday evening, is a work of tenderness and beauty, and it has been magnificently staged by Carmen Capalbo.

It is best not to pry into the structure of "The Cave Dwellers" too closely, lest it crumble like a paper ash. When Saroyan writes he just lets himself go, and discipline would be the ruination of him; he must be taken for what he is—a poet with a loving heart who sings of the lowly of the human race. No matter what pitiful, shabby corner he pries into, he finds beauty there.

The locale he has pried into in "The Cave Dwellers" is indeed shabby, and it has been magically evoked by the scene designer, William Pitkin. It is an abandoned theatre on the lower east side, the only remaining structure in a vast jumble of demolition. Soon it, too, will tumble beneath the pricks and blows of the wreckers.

Collection of Strays

But now, in this time of bitter winter, the stage is occupied by a shivering collection of strays who have made pallets on boxes and covers out of threads and shreds of ancient draperies. To them the reaches of the auditorium, where I sat in thrall Saturday evening, are empty. They are playing out their lives to nobody but themselves.

They are indeed a Saroyanesque group and they all are "of the theatre." They are dominated by the King and the Queen, whose ragged raiment is a reminder that once they were stars—he a great clown, she a great actress. With them is a hulking, simple ex-prize fighter, who is permitted to qualify because boxing is a kind of show business. They take in a homeless girl, pretending solemnly that she is an actress because she can recite the schoolchild's pledge of allegiance to the flag. They are joined by an unconquerable optimist who has a trained bear, a wife and a baby which was born in the stage doorway.

Great Performances

They are quite wonderful, these people, as they shiver through the last day of the old theatre. They share the pennies the King has begged and the milk the pug has stolen; they share their memories, hopes and loves. And when the wreckers come at last they go into the snow outside. Somehow there is hope for them, for their hearts are beating warmly.

The performances are without exception magnificent, with Barry Jones as the tragic jester, Eugenie Leontovich as the dimmed-out star, Wayne Morris as the simple and affectionate ex-fighter. Susan Harrison made little impression on me when I saw her in the film, "Sweet Smell of Success," but she captured me completely in "The Cave Dwellers." She is a young actress of extraordinary sensitivity. Gerald Hiken's performance as the bear trainer is another very fine one, and there are many more—including that of Ronald Weyand as a very realistic bear.

Ruth Morley's costumes are masterpieces of proud shabbiness and Lee Watson's lighting is a subtle performance in itself—and there are some extraordinarily evocative snatches of music by Bernardo Segall. Saroyan, the author of "The Time of Your Life," has given us his most beautiful play. A realist might say of it, "Why don't some of these people go out and get a job?" If they did there would be no play. And perhaps Saroyan is writing of a time when there were no jobs . . . or won't be any.